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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes how preschool children are served by or through local and state education agencies and the types of programs offered. The report presents the number of children served in: programs for preschool-aged children with disabilities; Head Start grantee and delegate agencies operating under the auspices of the local school board; Title I programs; and various state prekindergarten programs. Estimates on the number of preschoolers served by public schools are given, based on data from various national surveys. Implications for the field of early childhood education relate to schools' strong tradition of service to all children, schools' potential as an ally in securing revenue for early childhood programming, school officials' historical reluctance to incorporate services to preschool-aged children, and the slowness with which public education has worked to meet the needs of families beyond the traditional school day or school year. The report concludes by proposing that a National Commission on Early Childhood Services be created to examine the issue of how the United States will serve preschool-age children. (KB)

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NCEDL Spotlights

No. 13 August 1999

Public Schools & PreK Services

Following are excerpts from "Almost a Million Children in School Before Kindergarten: Who is responsible for Early Childhood Services" by Richard M. Clifford and Diane M. Early of UNC-CH and Tynette Hills of Durham, NC, published in the September 1999 issue of *Young Children* (Vol. 54 (5), pp. 48-51). Researchers summarized current data to gather information about the role of public schools in the education of pre-kindergarten-aged children.

Almost a million children are in school before kindergarten

Schools and school districts are becoming increasingly involved in providing services to children and families prior to entry into formal school at the customary kindergarten entry age. Data are scarce on the role of public schools in the education of such children. We are lacking even the most basic information. We have summarized the best information currently available on children served by or through local and state education agencies and the types of programs offered.

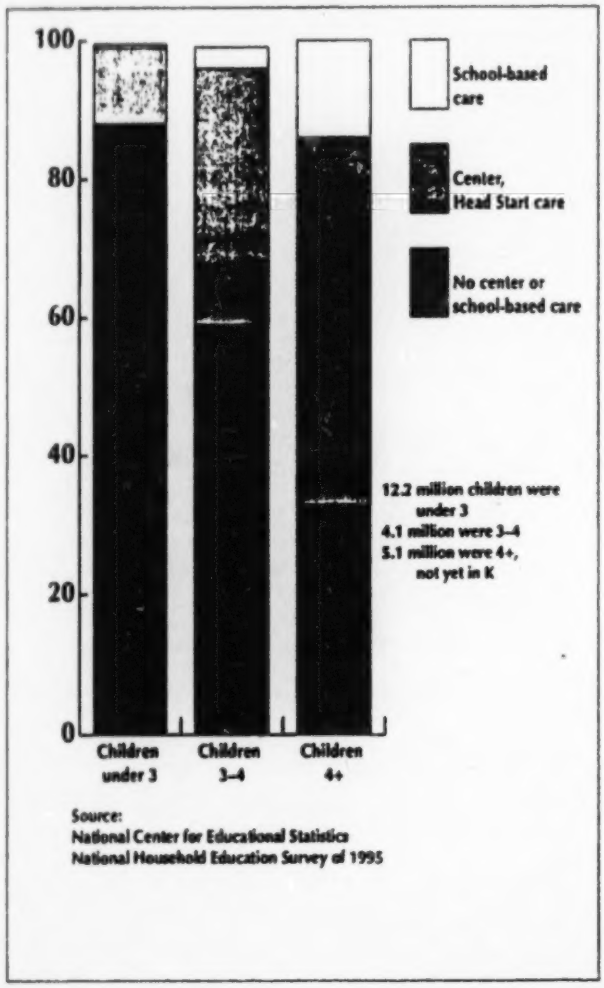
What types of programs do schools offer?

IDEA: Perhaps best known of the federal programs are the extensive services for preschool-aged children with disabilities and their families under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These services are provided by the schools themselves or by other agencies under contract to school districts.

Head Start: Less well known is the fact that many Head Start grantee and delegate agencies are school systems. Some of these Head Start programs are in school facilities and some work cooperatively with other agencies in non-school settings, but under the auspices of the local school board.

Title I: Other preschool programs in schools are funded through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. These programs are in high-poverty areas and serve children at risk of later school failure.

Numerous state programs: A review by the Family and Work Institute (1998) found that 39 states provide funding for some pre-kindergarten programming. Only seven of these limit funding to public schools. However, in all states that fund pre-kindergarten programs, school districts are eligible to offer the programs. The National Center for Children in Poverty's survey (1998) found that 34 states report that they support statewide comprehensive programs for preschoolers and in many cases have expanded such initiatives since 1996. States seem to be increasingly shifting toward a community-oriented approach.



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Who is served?

Using data from the 1995 National Household Education Survey (US Department of Education), we estimate that some 900,000 pre-kindergarten children were served in a public elementary, junior high or high school in 1995. This includes children who are in part-day programs at schools but spend the rest of the day in non-school-based settings or at home.

Data from the 1994 Schools and Staffing Survey (US Department of Education) show that school districts reported 307,012 pre-kindergarten applicants were approved for the National School Lunch Program, indicating that over a third of pre-kindergarten children in public schools are poor or near-poor.

Data from the Head Start Bureau and the US General Accounting Office indicate that a substantial number of Head Start programs are operated by schools, with four states (KS, KY, ND and WA) and DC having over 30% of their Head Start slots in public school grantee or delegate programs. Using these data, we estimate that about 23% of all Head Start programs are related to a public or private school, either as Head Start grantees or as delegate agencies.

Implications for the field of early childhood

School systems are a major new force in early childhood. This has both positive and negative implications for the field.

First, schools bring a strong tradition of service to all children. A 1999 (Ripple, et al.) report showed that standards for state-funded pre-kindergarten programs in many states are quite high.

Second, schools represent a strong potential ally in securing revenue for early childhood programming.

On the negative side, school officials have been historically reluctant to incorporate services to children prior to kindergarten entry age—a position sometimes supported by public opinion regarding the appropriate role of the education system.

Schools have been slow to meet the needs of families for services beyond the traditional school day (usually about 6.5 hours/day) and school year (usually around 9 months). Today most families with children 3-4 years of age need full day (at least 8 hours per day) and full year services.

Many state pre-k initiatives are working to integrate services from all the major sectors into a more unified system. Perhaps the most successful early example is the Georgia Preschool Program, which provided services to more than 61,000 4-year-olds in the last school year.

Conclusion . . . and a proposal

We propose the creation of a National Commission on Early Childhood Services to examine the issue of how we, as a country, will serve our youngest citizens. Until we have agreement on the basic issues of who has responsibility for governing early childhood services, who has responsibility for financing these services, and how we can best take advantage of the rich resources for serving children in this country, many families will continue to face a patchwork of services with many children spending their early years in settings of unknown quality.

If you want to know more...

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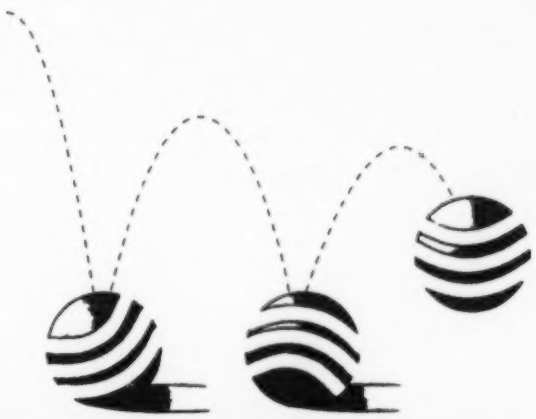

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For more information, contact Loyd Little at (919) 966-0867 or email loyd_little@unc.edu
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